



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
Department of Agricultural Resources
251 Causeway Street, Suite 500, Boston, MA 02114
617-626-1700 fax 617-626-1850 www.Mass.gov/AGR



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Secretary

KERRY HEALEY
Lieutenant Governor

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Commissioner

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CONTACT: Vanessa Gulati
617-626-1119

Celebrate National Blueberry Month in the Baystate!

July is National Blueberry Month and there are few places better to celebrate than in Massachusetts. Nationally ranked #2 in wild blueberry production and #17 in high bush production, the Commonwealth is a formidable grower of the blue fruit. According to a 2002 census, 40 Massachusetts farms harvest 411 acres of wild blueberries and 237 farms harvest 395 acres of high bush blueberries.

By purchasing local blueberries this season, you will be enjoying fresh summer tastes and sustaining local farms. In accordance with Governor Mitt Romney's Smart Growth Initiative, supporting local farms is particularly important in Massachusetts. By helping farmers to maintain their businesses, the state's open land, heritage, and overall beauty can be preserved. Preventing the development of open land throughout the state will allow future generations to enjoy farming and nature in the Commonwealth.

Even though this season's unpredictable weather has brought challenges to many area farmers, the blueberry crop is still looking like a success in most parts of the state. "Even after the wet weather, we are still in pretty good shape. We've been picking for a week and a half and the crop looks really good," says Mike Kosinski of Kosinski Farms in Westfield. "We only had a little winter injury to slightly affect our yield, but we will still be picking right through September 15th." Providing most western Massachusetts farmstands with their "North Country Blues" blueberries, Kosinski Farms has a good berry season ahead of them.

Although wild blueberries have been grown in the area for thousands of years, they were not commercially available in the United States until 1916. Within the past century, blueberry production *and* consumption has drastically increased due to national interest in the fruit's taste, convenience, versatility, and health benefits. To find local blueberries throughout the summer, visit local farmstands or farmers' markets for the freshest selections. Lists of local farmstands and farmers' markets can be found at the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' website, www.mass.gov/AGR. For those interested in an outdoor experience, there are plenty of pick-your-own blueberry farms throughout the state as well. Directions to these farms can also be found on the Department's website.

When picking or purchasing blueberries, look for berries with a uniform dark blue color and a silvery bloom, or natural protective wax coating. Berries should not look moist, but should instead look plump and firm. To properly store blueberries, refrigerate them in a covered container. Do not wash the berries until immediately before eating, as extra moisture causes loss of flavor and overall quality. Blueberries are best used within one week of purchasing. They can also be frozen and kept for one year. To freeze, wash, drain, and package the berries in freezer bags, making sure to remove damaged berries before packaging.

Recent studies have found that blueberries rank #1 in antioxidant capacity when compared to more than forty other fruits and vegetables. In other words, blueberries are *bursting* with incredibly healthy nutrients that can help the body fight aging and the risks of many chronic diseases, including cancer and heart disease. Besides antioxidants, blueberries are filled with many other good-for-you nutrients. Significant amounts of fiber, vitamins A and C, and potassium also help to maintain and promote overall health and well-being.

Blueberries are easy to add to any diet. For a delicious breakfast, add ½ cup of blueberries to cold cereal or mix them in with pancake, waffle, or muffin batter for a fruity twist. Blueberry smoothies also make great on-the-go breakfasts or snacks. The array of desserts containing blueberries is endless, and includes blueberry pie, blueberry buckle, and blueberry cheesecake. Blueberry jams, jellies, and sauces can be used with many foods. Blueberries can even be added to salads, meat, or seafood dishes. The possibilities are endless! Join Massachusetts in celebrating National Blueberry Month!

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